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# Uncovering Inequalities: Addressing the (RE)Production of Power Relations within Financial Aid Processes utilizing Institutional Ethnography

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Running Head: Institutional Ethnography of Financial Aid Processes

Uncovering Inequalities:

Addressing the (RE)Production of Power Relations within Financial Aid Processes

utilizing Institutional Ethnography

Victoria Ann Hill

A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

University of Washington

2016

Committee

Chair: Dr. Emily Noelle Sanchez Ignacio

Dr. Margaret Griesse

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences

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Victoria Ann Hill

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**Abstract**

Uncovering Inequalities: Addressing the (RE)Production of Power Relations within Financial Aid Processes utilizing Institutional Ethnography  
Victoria Ann Hill

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
Dr. Emily Noelle Sanchez Ignacio  
School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences

The purpose of this research project is to critically map the University of Washington's institutional practices concerning financial aid and related administrative policies and procedures related to the FAFSA application. This research was conducted by using institutional ethnography as a method to analyze the difficulty of carrying out organizational duties under complex federal, state and institutional policies. It also considers how the process of carrying out these duties creates tensions for staff, and how the unintended consequences of power relations are produced and reproduced between the process of staff carrying out their duties and students receiving aid. Information obtained from the observations and interviews, has the potential to usefully impact and change policies that have unintentionally replicated injustice or inequality for students enrolled in, or planning to attend, the university. Equally important, analyzing and mapping this information allows for the facilitation of a greater understanding of policies, by disseminating the information through a website and social media outlets, where the maps of financial aid processes can be easily located and utilized.

**Key Words:** Financial Aid, Institutional Ethnography, FAFSA, Power Relations, Social Justice

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**“Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to people who prepare for it today”—Malcolm X**

### **Introduction**

How can our society begin to cultivate a better understanding of the difficulties students experience within the process of applying for financial aid funding? The subject is not easily answered, demonstrated by its popularity as a topic of discussion and debate in the public sphere both statewide and nationally. In addition, the United States is currently in the midst of a presidential election campaign, which has made recent conversations on the subject particularly intense and polarizing. Across the nation, education is often a central theme in heated campaign rhetoric within both the conservative and liberal parties. This is especially true for postsecondary education, with each political party offering radically differing agendas to the public. This includes propositions from some politicians to make postsecondary education free for everyone, and propositions from others to do away with postsecondary funding programs altogether. Invariably, these political conversations always climax in heated debates on how to ameliorate the current loan and financial aid programs and decrease the billions of tax dollars<sup>1</sup> allocated to support these funds. Frustratingly, efficient and effective solutions on how to keep education accessible to everyone in our society never seem to emerge from the rhetoric.

In the scholarly domain, access to postsecondary education is often categorized as a significant pathway to increasing social and economic status for low-income peoples. Often referred to as a ‘socioeconomic equalizer,’ research studies assert that access to education is

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<sup>1</sup> According to *Trends in Student Aid 2015*, an annual report published by the non-profit organization *The College Board*, in 2014-15, undergraduate and graduate students received 238.9 billion in student aid in the form of grants from all sources, Federal Work-Study, Federal loans, and federal tax credits and deductions.



the surest way out of poverty for people in our society (Hu & St. John 2001; Singell 2003). Distinguishing education as an equalizer between the wealthy and the poor helps substantiate the value education provides, and validates to the continuously questioning public the large amounts of federal and state expenditures on financial aid. Further, the emergence of education as a source of social and economic mobility for low-income people provides an opportunity for universities to promote education as a form of social justice for people who have historically been denied this avenue to prosperity (Morgan 2014). To establish this, institutions of higher education must be diligent in staying accessible to the members of their communities who would socially and economically benefit the most from education. This starts with purposeful reflection on whether or not they are adequately providing pathways to education that are easily accessible to everyone. If universities are to be active in their contribution to access, they should support focused, problem-oriented research as a practical way of providing actionable and useful knowledge<sup>2</sup> towards that end.

In emphasizing the problem of access for many low-income students, Bridget Terry Long contends that high-achieving low-income students are still not attending college at the same rates as low-achieving affluent students and cites race and ethnicity as contributing factors of this disparity (2010). Further, Edward St. John and Shouping Hu (2001) contend that a multitude of research finds minority students are 'competitively disadvantaged' in their ability

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<sup>2</sup> Actionable knowledge is a term David Mundel uses in his contribution to the book *Reinventing Financial Aid* to describe how student aid reform should be aimed toward an awareness of the behavioral impacts of policy change rather than an assessment of the aid that is received by individuals and institutions, which is common.

to access education, and in their ability to choose which college to attend. Although many research studies demonstrate access as an overarching problem within educational attainment, research on access generally targets gaps in the amount of aid to recipients, rather than a focusing on the policies and procedures used to award aid (Kelly & Golderick-Rab 2014). Based on this, it is imperative to examine financial aid processes and policy to ensure that structural barriers embedded within these systems are identified.

Where does one start when trying to tackle the many structural inequalities within the educational context? Bridget Terry Long (2010) identifies the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as a significant barrier confronting low-income students who apply for aid. She asserts that some critiques of the FAFSA include a lack of information regarding the process, as well as the difficulty and length of the form which is currently over 100 questions long, and causes significant confusion for applicants. The FAFSA is therefore an important tool to examine within the framework of education policy, as the form governs many different areas of the financial aid process. Financial aid offices utilize the form as a tool to determine student eligibility for funds, which includes federal, state, and institutional sources. Currently, changes are being implemented regarding how the FAFSA is administered, including a change in how income is reported. However, the changes will not take place until later in 2016 so the effects of those changes on the students affected most negatively by the FAFSA process, may not be known for some time.

Based on the problems regarding access to postsecondary education for low-income and marginalized students, my research examines the financial aid system and processes within that

system at two financial aid offices within a public university in Washington State. To address the complexity of the FAFSA and how it affects processes within these offices, I conduct an inquiry utilizing institutional ethnography (IE) as a method of investigation. Within this study, I observe the work practices and duties of financial aid staff to learn how processes occur, and why policies are in place. I also explore the obstacles that these complex processes create for staff who are assisting students, over seventy percent of whom are accessing some sort of financial aid.<sup>3</sup> Finally, this project utilizes the information gathered from the study to create maps of financial aid processes, and display the maps on a website to provide a way for people to have access to visual tools that will help them better understand and navigate these processes.

### **Personal Entrée to the Study**

I am motivated to do this study by the fact that I have been working for over a decade as a financial aid counselor within public colleges and universities. Working in this capacity has been equally rewarding and frustrating, and most financial aid counselors will attest to the frustrations they feel about the financial aid system. Especially when they spend much of their time meeting with students who have trouble resolving the financial obstacles inherent in obtaining a postsecondary education. Counselors are not alone; frustration is also common among students. There have been many times that I have met with upset students whose expectations for funding don't match up with their experiences. These expectations, so far out of sync with reality, often result in a myriad of stressful and negative emotions such as

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<sup>3</sup> Published on the UW Tacoma financial aid website.

anger, fear, desperation and despair. In fact, one of the more difficult aspects of doing this work is successfully helping students navigate the intersection of financial and administrative requirements involved in obtaining their postsecondary education. As difficult as it is, it also happens to be very rewarding witnessing students successfully navigate the financial aid system, and I am thankful that those triumphs have occurred consistently enough to make me want to keep doing this work.

Working in this profession, I have had prolonged exposure to an excess of intense human experiences. However, the opportunity to share in a student's achievements, greatly outweighs the difficulty of sharing in the burden of their collapsed hopes and dreams. Further, these encounters have brought such richness to my own experiences, that they drive my dedication to this work.

In addition, I am immersed within this system of "schooling" people in other ways that help provide insight to, and keep me connected with students frustrated by the process. For example, as a student for many years I've tried to model the importance of education to my own children as a way to break the cycle of poverty within our family. Like others, I have experienced many frustrations with how to do this without accumulating large amounts of debt. In my work with students, the connections with them are most evident when I share my personal experiences in the uncertainty of investing dollars into a 'system' that does not guarantee a rate of return on the investment.

So, it is the difficulty and struggle of the students that inspires me to do this work. It is because of them that I am driven to make a significant contribution to the notion of "bettering

the system.” I do find this idea somewhat comical (and tragic), based on how long it has taken me to really understand the true difficulty of the task. However, these are the reasons I have long-felt obligated to critically reflect on, and study, the universal practices that sustain complex financial aid processes. I hope that in doing so, I can provide insight and useful knowledge to our students, staff and the South Sound community.

### **Institutional Ethnography as a Method of Inquiry**

Because this topic is of such importance to me both personally and professionally, my hope was to conduct research that was impactful presently and locally. For these reasons, I was drawn to the idea of using institutional ethnography as a way to investigate the problems I came across in my daily interactions as a financial aid counselor. Institutional Ethnography is a qualitative research approach, rooted in activism and social justice and designed to “consider the forms of disadvantage and irrationality generated by the dominant arrangements in advanced capitalist societies” (Grahame 1998, p. 347-348). The research is grounded in the particular knowledge of an insider who is privy to a ‘problematic’ of what is happening in ordinary citizen’s lives. IE then utilizes that knowledge to explicate themes of injustice, inequality or marginalization within discursive<sup>4</sup> organizational practice and process, which includes the use of governing texts and institutional language.

I was also drawn to this method for the ability to approach the investigation from the standpoint of an insider, and to use that knowledge to help inform others that aren’t privileged

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<sup>4</sup> Discursivity within IE methodology refers to the interwoven, yet muddled, nature of bureaucratic processes within institutional systems structure.

to those insights. While I don't anticipate the conscious perpetuation of injustice or inequality within financial aid processes in the offices that I included in my study, unjust power relations (termed ruling relations in IE) are surely present. Uncovering relations of ruling within this institutional setting will help isolate where problems exist, and identify if students are disadvantaged as a result. It can also serve to create campus-wide discussions on how the university can better assist students in navigating the complexities of financial aid systems and structure. To make the best use of this information, financial aid processes should be explored, mapped and shared with the community through websites, lectures and other widely used forms of communication.

### **Student Success and Financial Aid**

There are many overarching perspectives within the overall literature on how education theory is used to evaluate the effectiveness of financial aid of postsecondary institutions. Based on this, it is helpful to identify some of the theoretical contexts through which financial aid policy is often evaluated. Most of the research originates within the disciplines of sociology, education and economics (Chen and DesJardins 2010; St. John 2006; Somers 1995). As a result, the research on financial aid policy within higher education is particularly extensive, employing several different methods and models to analyze the policies for their effectiveness (MacCallum 2008; St. John 2006). These broad perspectives and multiple models can be fairly complicated and difficult to replicate within individual institutional settings. This limits their ability to create consistent information that contributes to the reform of larger policy issues within the higher education system (St. John 2006; Kelly & Golderick-Rab 2014). For instance, one study might

use logistic regression to focus on how campus-based aid affects student persistence and retention (Hossler, Gross & Ziskin 2006), while another might use linear regression to analyze what variables are most evident in the impact of tuition and financial aid on enrollment (Desjardin, Ahlburg & Mcall 2006). The use of regression analysis as a model to evaluate student persistence and retention is a particularly prominent within economic studies, but has been criticized for the omission of important variables (St. John 2006).

To further understand the context of these complex contributions of theory and method within the research on outcomes of students in higher education, a discussion of early models is warranted. There are a few specific models that contributed to early policy reform on education that are important to emphasize for their enormous contribution to the literature on higher education policy. Most notably, the concept of Academic and Social Integration Theory by Vincent Tinto (1975), which he later developed into the Theory of Student Departure (1993). In addition, the Causal Model of Student Attrition by John Bean (1980) contributed to future research by helping to develop some of the complex sociological, conceptual models that continue to shape studies on retention research today (Hossler 2009; Cabrera et al 1993).

In offering an expanded view of early models of education research theory, it becomes evident on how these early concepts predominately shaped the way in which research on postsecondary education was constructed and conducted. To illustrate, Tinto's 1975 scholarly work was not an actual study, but rather a synthesis of relevant research conducted at the time. This initial work allowed him to develop a model that was intended to examine a student's academic and social integrations into their college environment as a measure of

persistence and academic success. Interestingly, it was adapted from Emile Durkheim's (1951) sociological theory on suicide. Durkheim's theory conceptualizes the idea that individuals who do not socially and morally integrate themselves into society are at greater risk of suicide (Somers 1995). Tinto recycled that idea to measure student attrition. He ascertained that students who have difficulty academically and socially integrating themselves into their college environments, would be at the greatest risk of dropping out. Tinto's early scholarly work laid the groundwork in the field of education research because it generated the principal model used to measure student dropout behavior in contemporary research.

His later Theory of Student Departure (1993) was developed after he was heavily criticized for the exclusion of financial factors as a determinant of dropout risk, and for narrowly focusing on traditional students in residential academic settings. In this later work, he addressed critics concerns and developed a more sophisticated theory by including external factors that he had not previously accounted for, and by clarifying the difference between system departure (students departing from the entire education system) and institutional departure (departure from the institution itself), which his previous literature had not yet distinguished.

Tinto's (1993) departure theory studied differences between students' sex, race, social status and ability and used these new variables to help determine their impact on student success. In this research, he found that departure was the same for males and females, and more prominent for Blacks, Hispanics and lower-income students. These crucial updates to his theory have culminated in significant influences for modern research because they are useful in shaping more detailed, rich studies.



John Bean's (1980) model of student attrition posits that student departure from college is analogous to organizational turnover. He conceptualized the idea that student attrition from college should be viewed as neither negative nor positive, but rather a natural process, and then created a model that uses path analysis to causally connect four categories of variables to explain variations in student departure. The dependent variable is dropout, and the intervening variables include those used in studies on organizational turnover: satisfaction, organizational determinants, institutional commitment, and background variables.

Results from Bean's (1980) study found that twenty-one percent of females' and twelve percent of males' departure from college was attributable to the variables used in the study. Bean's model is considered more useful in helping administrators develop institutional policy to strengthen retention strategy, but does have its limitations. Bean himself notes that his study "failed to account for eighty percent of the variance in dropout for women, and ninety percent for men" (1980, p.185). Further, he asserts that work for future research would need to distinguish what other variables might be included to reduce the explained variance he found.

Although Tinto and Bean's models set the standard for measuring attrition in early empirical study, and were valiant in their attempts to provide insight into student outcomes within postsecondary systems, they are now scrutinized for their many limitations. This serves as evidence of the swiftly changing nature of policy in higher education, and the inevitable lapse that occurs between research and actual occurring events. However, synthesizing the research on early education theory provides scope on how these studies have historically dominated the literature, and provides perspective on the overall themes of their contribution to policy

reform.

To consider the contemporary themes in research, Edward St. John (2006) identifies some central theories within the more recent scholarship on education including economic theory, social theory and cultural/social capital theory. He argues that the constructs within these theories include numerous themes that limit their ability to be universally effective in reforming policy (St. John 2006). For example, St. John (2006) suggests that studies within the economic discipline generally argue that choices to enroll are almost solely dependent on financial variables (Deming & Dynarski 2009; Dynarski 2003; Linsemer, Rosen & Rouse 2006; Golderick-Rab, Harris & Trostel 2009). In addition, he asserts that the inability to factor in indirect contributors, including familial contributions within the variables used to predict outcomes, overlooks important social factors that must be considered if the economic perspective is to be effective in future inquiry (St. John 2006).

Next, St. John (2006) claims that sociological theory includes the impact of familial support but often lacks the ability to synthesize the policy variables that dictate how funding is administered. These theories generally include themes of social mobility, socioeconomic status, and access, and provide the foundations needed to include cultural and familial variables within scientific study (Bettinger, Oreopoulos & Long 2009; St. John 2006). Finally, he contends that while Cultural Capital Theory,<sup>5</sup> does emphasize the familial and community support in preparing for college, the theory has not previously taken into account the role family finances play in the

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<sup>5</sup> Cultural Capital Theory was developed by Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in 1986. The theory is designed to explain how power is accumulated through economic, social and cultural capital, but is not acquired on an equal playing field in life by individuals and is limited by other social processes (Geiser 2012).

formation of cultural capital itself. Further, he claims this theory has only recently begun to consider the role of financial aid with respect to college access (2006).

More recently, scholarship on education policy has shifted from an emphasis on quantitative methods, to a paradigm that includes mixed methods and qualitative studies as equally important in contributing to policy restructuring on education (St. John 2006; Kelly & Goderick-Rab 2014). As it becomes more difficult for students to balance life's many actualities, it is evident that researchers need to shift their focus to include qualitative methods that are better able to capture these complexities.

### **FAFSA as a problematic**

Literature on the FAFSA is often centrally focused on the complexity of the FAFSA application process and FAFSA Completion rates linked to persistence and retention (Bird & Castleman 2014; Feeny & Heroff 2013; Davidson 2013; Castleman & Page 2016). For instance, there is widespread agreement among researchers on the overall lack of knowledge and information available on how to navigate the FAFSA process (Bird and Castleman 2014; Davidson 2013; Feeny & Heroff 2013; Scott-Clayton 2015; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton 2006). This lack of information as it pertains to FAFSA, results in problems with timeliness of completion as one of the main components hindering specific groups of students, particularly low-income and first-generation students (Feeney & Heroff 2013). For many students seeking financial aid, completing a FAFSA before crucial deadlines generally results in significantly higher amounts of need-based funding. In this regard, timely FAFSA completion for low-income students can be

the difference between financing an education through loans, and receiving grants to cover much of the costs.

There is also an abundance of literature on FAFSA and persistence. According to Kelli Bird and Benjamin Castleman (2014), much of that research links low-income and the first-generation college applicants to low rates of persistence (p. 74). Because the FAFSA application has been identified as a positive predictor to staying enrolled (Bird & Castleman 2014), mapping the barriers contained within the FAFSA directly contributes to the social justice of these marginalized groups by providing them access to comprehensive knowledge of the FAFSA application process. Although there is a general consensus that the FAFSA filing process, in and of itself, is a barrier to students accessing college and receiving the proper amount of aid (Bird & Castleman 2014; Feeney & Heroff 2013; Davidson 2013; Scott-Clayton 2015), summaries of the components within the FAFSA that contribute to its delineation as a barrier are generally overlooked. However in their study, Mary Feeney and John Heroff (2013) were able to summarize the “considerable effort” it takes first-generation and low-income students to complete the FAFSA (p. 67). The barriers outlined by Feeney and Heroff, (2013) included the lack of extensive personal networks to assist in grasping the complexity of the information when parents were unknowledgeable, as well as:

- 1) confusing forms that ask too many questions, 2) questions about family financial status that the student may be ill-equipped to answer, 3) assumptions of parental support, 4) general lack of knowledge about available aid, and 5) deceptive and hard to meet deadlines (p. 67).

Therefore, these studies identify the FAFSA as an important problematic within the financial aid process, and the student's eventual success. To extend this process a step further and fully realize the complexity of the FAFSA within the actualities of the everyday lived experiences of students, I utilized the IE method of investigation to learn how the FAFSA textually mediates and socially organizes the daily duties of staff. Examining the processes of staff, illuminates the eventual difficulty for students, as staff becomes tasked with clarifying the information that the FAFSA cannot concisely communicate within financial aid processes. Observing financial aid staff and explicating what occurs as the FAFSA form is transmitted into specific processes within financial aid, illuminates specifically where FAFSA becomes troublesome.

I also investigated the FAFSA application beyond the 'plain' text it employs, to determine some inherent principles within its underlying structure. For example, within the section to determine an individual's dependency status, the military ideology contained within the FAFSA becomes evident. Specifically, question forty-nine states, "Are you currently serving on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces for purposes other than training?" There is also the inclusion of the underlying assumption that students applying for FAFSA are products of two-parent families which suggests a patriarchal philosophy. Finally, overwhelming references to capitalistic ideology are demonstrated by questions pertaining to assets, tax information, bank accounts and investments. This pre-supposes classist notions of wealth, or at the very least assumes an inclusion to the middle class. Moreover, these questions constitute concepts that are grounded in the hegemonic structure of systems that serve to alienate specific groups of people; particularly first-generation and low-income groups of students.

To fully understand how these concepts materialize as barriers within financial aid processes, my research documents the problems that arise for financial aid counselors as they try to verify and document the information contained within the FAFSA to determine eligibility for funding. The confusion becomes evident as the FAFSA tries to replicate and construct the information provided by applicants within university processes as an account of their present situation when in fact, they are events that have occurred in the past. The problems are exposed when the 'current account' must then be verified by workers to document the information and determine eligibility for funding. This also creates a host of problems for applicants, as the information is often not representative of their present circumstance, and they must take additional administrative steps to correct the information. By explicating the social organization of how the FAFSA governs behind the scenes, I am able to uncover the underlying themes of power embedded within the organizational structure.

### **Using IE to uncover the social organization within the literature**

In reviewing the literature, it is clear that the intersection of complex federal, state and institutional policies within financial aid processes has effects on students that have not been fully contemplated within the overall methods employed to conduct much of the research. Moreover, examining this from an institutional ethnographic view, we can determine that the application of these political policies within financial aid processes serves to organize institutional practices in a way that creates 'forms of ruling' that collectively work as obstacles in student's ability to be successful. In explicating the ruling relations embedded within the processes of institutional practices as they occur, institutional ethnographic studies pinpoint

the troublesome policies that affect the people who are bumping up against them. This includes whether they occur through work process for staff, or as a student trying to navigate the system. Once uncovered, the processes can be 'mapped' to be used as a guide to navigate these problematic processes.

In addition, institutional ethnographers survey the literature to identify how the researchers are situated within their studies, and the motivating factors driving them to complete the inquiry. This helps the institutional ethnographer identify how accounts are constructed, the standpoint of the researcher and whether their standpoint remains in their final published works (Campbell & Gregor 2002). In this way, IE studies view scholarly literature in a way that is not necessarily synthesized to determine the dominant perspectives within scholarly domains, nor is it a tool to justify the researcher's knowledge. Rather, literature is surveyed for the social organization that occurs within it to better understand how that organization of processes shapes individual experience.

As Campbell and Gregor frame it:

The literature may speak about this topic one way, while the people on the ground may speak about it another. As already suggested, scholars usually treat research accounts as authoritative. However, when an institutional ethnographer reads the literature, it is not just for the facts, but to analyze the literature's social organization. (pg. 52).

In this way, understanding the positionality of the researcher conducting the study is an important distinction within IE investigations, as it is used to provide transparency to what that researcher has invested in their accomplishments.

To examine economic studies for the social organization that is located within, we can start with how economic studies organize current themes within the research domain. For example, topics that dominate economic studies like cost, choice, risk aversion and price are centered around a capitalistic ideology which serves to marginalize low-income and first-generation students based on their historical exclusion to knowledge of this system. Moreover, an examination of literature through an IE lens, captures the social relations rooted in sociological theory. For instance, these studies are ripe with themes of culture and class, but disregard the ideological underpinnings of those concepts that are rooted in oppression and exclusion.

As research is synthesized from the view of the institutional ethnographer, it becomes strikingly evident that the organization of the social relationships that create formidable power structures within the organizations practice are absent from discussion. In other words, identifying the roots of the problems within the processes that govern financial aid practice has gone unexamined. Uncovering the ideology that governs these processes, allows for deeper understanding of how and why process and policy become problematic within the everyday lived experiences of the human beings coming into contact with them.

### **IE as a Method of Inquiry (Part II)**

Developed by Canadian Sociologist Dorothy Smith, institutional ethnography is a blending of sociological method and theory that is designed to help empower 'ordinary people' whose lives are unknowingly socially organized by the coordinating activities of institutions. The goal of institutional ethnographic research is to construct a '*map*' of a '*problematic*' that occurs within a particular institution "to enlarge the scope of what becomes visible from that site, mapping



the relations that connect one local site to others” (Smith 2005, p. 29). Institutional Ethnography (IE) is unlike traditional sociological research, in that it aims to integrate the actualities of people’s lived and embodied experience within the research, rather than “construct them as objects of investigation or representation” (Smith 2005, p. 28).

For studies focused on fields such as health, social work or education, IE becomes a useful tool for researchers to critically examine how institutions within these social domains develop and shape knowledge through their organizational practices. In addition, IE allows for the discovery of how individual relationships to processes occur within daily activities and extends that knowledge into a valuable resource that could be utilized to inform policy.

Lafrance and Nichols (2012) posit IE’s usefulness to their own study:

We are drawn to IE because it takes into account this situated variability of experience within institutions, casting individuals as active and interested, mindfully negotiating the competing priorities and material conditions of their work day. IE allows us to ask how the shape of work practices for one employee may be dramatically different from the practices of another due to numerous personal, institutional, and cultural factors that arise out of the categorization of their work within a hierarchical system of labor. (p. 133).

Once the experiential accounts of individual work are discovered, examination of the social organization that is embedded within those accounts can begin. Social organization begins in the textual mediation and discursive activity located within institutional practice; these are the principal agents of governing that determine how ruling relations within organizations take

shape.

Governing depends upon getting information across many sites in as efficient a manner as possible, and happens with the use of text, databases, media and specialized language. As Smith (2005) suggests, “The constancy of the text is also key to the effect of institutional standardization across multiple local sites of people’s work” (p. 108). That is all institutional processes originate in some sort of text as a way of organizing the information that flows within and between organizational processes. Whether it is an application that has been submitted by a student hoping to enroll, or a financial aid document offered for review, texts and documents circulate through the organization until they are ‘activated’ by the workers utilizing them to complete the responsibilities associated with their daily tasks. Ruling relations occur within these social relations when institutional language is used as the lens through which the text is taken up or ‘operated,’ thus objectifying the accounts of the experiences related within the text and subordinating them to organizational imperatives (Campbell & Gregor 2002; Smith 2001, 2005).

### **Theoretical Foundations of IE**

The concepts that form the basis of IE draw on several sociological philosophies, including subtle insight from Foucault’s theory on the power relations of discourse in society as expressed through language and practices. Smith argues that organizational discursive practices are exclusionary to the people who have no familiarity with that knowledge and are thereby affected unknowingly (2005). Another important basis for IE is Feminist Standpoint Theory. Dorothy Smith was one of the original standpoint theorists and incorporated feminist theory

into IE for the ‘insider perspective’ that feminist theory embodies. She believed that this perspective was needed to give more accurate accounts of marginalization and oppression. This is why Smith originally conceptualized her method as a “sociology for women” (rather than about them) to address the patriarchal nature within traditional sociological methods. This later expanded to a “sociology for people” as Smith realized the importance of the method to evolve beyond a critique of patriarchal ideology (Smith 2005).

In their guidebook on conducting an institutional ethnographic research study, Marie Campbell and Frances Gregor (2002) relate how Smith utilizes Marxist theory in IE in the concept of ruling relations of class oppression, and its operation in capitalism. They argue that within IE, Smith brings the concept into contemporary focus to include practices of ruling within the presently automated practices of language and text that were not relevant in Marx’s time (p. 39). Further, Campbell and Gregor (2002) also argue that positivist and other types of research are biased in that they claim to produce objective knowledge as if the researcher’s stance is positionless. This is unlike institutional ethnographic studies in that they avoid this by grounding the ontological foundation of investigation in the experience and knowledge of the researcher (p. 52). This is important as it situates the researcher within the inquiry as an expert ‘knower’ and orients them to a particular standpoint, which is especially useful to identifying and mapping the problematic.

### **IE Design and Procedures**

My research study utilized institutional ethnography to trace complexities within financial aid processes perpetuated by the Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA). IE studies generally

locate problematics within text and the FAFSA exemplifies a textually mediated form of ruling that occurs within the university's organizational practices. To locate and explicate the specific problematic processes related to FAFSA, I completed 6 observations and interviews of 5 individual financial aid staff at two of the university's campuses. I also interviewed three other staff outside of financial aid processes, but within university administration to determine how they viewed the FAFSA as a function of financial aid processes.

In addition to interviews, I observed financial aid and university staff as they interacted with students in lobby areas of university administrative and financial aid offices. This was done to potentially gauge student's reactions to the information being given to them, and staff's reactions to information being sought of them. Observations that occurred in lobby areas were to clarify some of the possible tensions located within the transfer of complex information between staff and students.

This research study was approved by the UW Human Subjects Division, Institutional Review Board. Based on the types of recruitment methods used for this particular type of study, demographic information of participants was not necessary to consider for participation. To recruit participants, I used purposive sampling including expert and snowball sampling recruitment procedures. This is important to note, as IE studies must identify who is embedded within the processes of the problematic, in this instance the FAFSA form, and then 'research up' from that place to follow the problematic through the organizational hierarchy.

In this way, my study was somewhat limited because I only had access to participants who were willing to be included, and was not able to make extensive requests for participation due

to time constraints on volunteers, and myself. As the sole researcher, the scope needed to be limited to something manageable. However, there were enough participants in the study to gain an understanding of the difficulty of processes within the duties and practices which was documented through observations and unstructured interviews.

Once volunteers consented to participate, audio recordings of staff being observed and interviewed were set up during their scheduled work duties. Processes that were observed during observations included a counselor review of Satisfactory Academic Progress Appeals, a counselor on telephone duties, a counselor completing random data entry of student information, and general counselor review of documents, in which the utilization of the industry-wide norm of the 'professional judgement' process to re-determine eligibility was observed. In addition to these observations, some key management staff were interviewed for their understanding of the FAFSA process as a function underlying financial aid processes.

This raises another limitation of this study, which was the inability to interview specific managers that are directly related to the development of the culture of the organization specifically within financial aid, and who are related directly to the development of how processes occur within the financial aid office. This is important, as part of IE's goal is to research up through process to determine the extent of social organization within practices and then potentially trace that information to locate how the practice begins within the organizational process.

The design for observations and interviews was primarily unstructured due to the ambiguity of what processes I would be observing of the participants who volunteered. However, the

observations and discussion of processes were conducted with the idea of the FAFSA as a problematic in mind. To clarify, I conducted the observations with the specific goal of identifying when, how and why the FAFSA becomes problematic within the completion of daily tasks, regardless of what the task was that was actually being observed. To further clarify, as a financial aid counselor embedded in these processes daily, I had prior knowledge that the majority of the work completed within the financial aid office is connected to the underlying organization of the FAFSA.

Information collected was then transcribed and analyzed, first for evidence of specific problematic processes related to the FAFSA as an organizing tool, then for other evidence of social organization and ruling relations occurring within process. This included the tracing of ‘activations’ of institutional text through sequences of textually-coordinated exchanges of which we will discuss more deeply in the analysis. I also scrutinized the transcriptions for evidence of institutional language and specific instances of organizational culture and norms that could be identified within processes.

### **Reflexive/Positionality of Researcher**

As emphasized in the previous section, the positionality of the researcher is important in terms of transparency regarding the underlying motivations of the researcher. This research is not exempt from that scrutiny. My particular interest in completing this research was to be useful to others within my career and area of expertise. It can be particularly painful for an extremely empathetic person like myself to watch people suffer, especially needlessly, and I

have witnessed it enough times in this work to make me want to make a difference right where I am.

I feel I have been fortunate in being allowed to complete this study where I work. Although I executed the proper channels to make it possible, I could have easily been denied the permission to conduct this research at all. Asking your employer to allow you to question the objectivity of their practices is a difficult situation to navigate, and because it is so difficult it is relevant as part of the analysis. Critical examination of how tasks get completed by a single employee is a risky situation, not just for the employee conducting the research, but for the employer taking a chance on allowing this information to be disseminated. Thankfully, I work within an organization that values critical reflection as an opportunity for growth, and is not fearful about uncovering any hidden principles that may negatively influence organizational process or disadvantage certain groups.

Another fear, however irrational, was considering how this information would be viewed by my colleagues. I am not ashamed to admit that I greatly admire nearly all of them, and would be devastated to know that any of them thought this work anything other than an honest attempt at making processes better for them and any students that might be affected. Nonetheless, there were many nights that I read and re-read these pages thinking “is this the critical reflection of someone who truly wants to affect change, or could this piece of writing be construed as a disgruntled complaining employee.” Articulating this intimate information allows for some understanding of where my motivations lie within this work, and shows the

difficulty of conveying this information, particularly in that I genuinely enjoy working for this organization, and have been able to excel within it on every level.

Aside from my positionality as an employee and colleague of the participants in this study, I am also situated as a researcher and student. This means I am still learning about the process of research and theory and how to apply that to this work. Moreover, as a student accessing aid myself, at times my experience has been that of the masses. This includes frustration at administrative and financial aid process, and feeling like I have to jump through the hoops in order to secure a better future for myself and family. Not unlike the students that sit on the other side of my desk daily, I have hope that the dollars I've invested in this system will pay off in better opportunities in the future, enable me to increase my socio-economic status and help establish a pathway to new avenues of prosperity.

In addition to the situations above, it is important to me to situate myself within the context of this process as a counselor to students. In explaining and interpreting forms of institutional power as they manifest themselves within these processes, I am wholly a part of that process. In determining eligibility of aid for students, I execute institutional power through the process of determining student eligibility, and must be accountable to that within this research.

Further, as processes occur and descriptions of the work are presented, what has been expressed by other counselors within this narrative, are also examples of my some of my own experiences within the work settings. At this juncture, I could painstakingly convey the many tasks that counselors execute within their everyday duties, but that would be another document entirely. Instead I focus on the narratives from the data I collected and how to



connect that information to the overall problem of access to the university for marginalized groups of people.

### **FAFSA as a problematic within Processes**

Before I venture too deeply into the analysis of these processes, I want to articulate the difficulty of sharing that data in a simple linear progression of evidence like in the sections dedicated to ruling relations or text mediation. In fact, much of the data overlaps into other areas,<sup>6</sup> but for purposes of readability I chose to section off data in a specific way. Although, I will try to explicate the many examples of social organization the data represents, I wanted to make it clear that there is more than one way to present the data within this methodology and inclusion of data within one section of this narrative does not necessarily exclude it from other areas.

Analysis of data within institutional ethnography is always framed from the standpoint of those located within the research. This study utilizes the standpoint of the financial aid counselors and other university staff who must engage with the FAFSA in their daily duties. Every day, the lives of ordinary people (students) are shaped by the organizing of their social relations within the discursive processes of the institution which are embedded in practice through texts and institutional language. By explicating these discursive processes, I expose the ruling relations that serve to objectify and marginalize the people who must interact with the system as a means to accomplish their educational goals.

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<sup>6</sup> An example of this might be data that provides examples of both organizational power and textual mediation, but for the purpose of this project is listed in the section that refers to ruling relations rather than institutional text and discourse.

I begin by dissecting a small part of how the FAFSA operates locally and trans-locally<sup>7</sup> as a governing text and the first step of the process for both students and financial aid staff. Financial aid counselors' processes begin in the deciphering of data that is extended through the filling out of the FAFSA form. From the comfort and privacy of their own personal spaces, persons seeking financial help for college fill out the form and the information is transmitted to the university through a central processing system. Upon entering the central processing system, data contained within the FAFSA encounters a complex coordination of checks and balances through several other government agencies to verify particular information regarding the student applying. The information is forwarded to the colleges indicated in each individual FAFSA that a potential student completes. When the individual student's FAFSA information is downloaded into a schools database system<sup>8</sup> verification items are included with the information.

A textual analysis of the FAFSA reveals the influence of federal apparatuses within the educational system. For example, as the FAFSA is completed and checked with Department of Homeland Security information for proof of citizenship, a non-match would come up in a student's downloaded information with a requirement for this information to be verified by the school the student wishes to attend. This process serves to establish proof of identity as well as eligibility for aid. This in turn triggers the schools for which the student has applied to request

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<sup>7</sup> Local and trans-local are terms used in IE methodology to explain where process occurs. Local refers to how process occurs from within one area or unit of an institution to another. Trans-local refers to the transmission of information from within the institution to agencies outside of the institution.

<sup>8</sup> There are numerous types of financial aid management systems that colleges can use internally to organize FAFSA information. At the financial aid offices within this study, a "homegrown" database system called "SDB" (Student DataBase) is used. Although other systems may be similar, SDB is unique to the university in this study.

that the student turn in proof of citizenship in the form of a birth certificate, certificate of naturalization, passport or other document deemed acceptable by the rules.

The process outlined above includes just one example of several required to establish proof of identity, and eligibility for aid. In fact, externally the FAFSA shares information with numerous government agencies including, The Social Security Administration (SSA), The Department of Justice (DOJ), Veterans Administration (VA), The Office of Budget and Management (OMB), and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). This illustrates the embedded involvement of the other bureaucratic actors, which occurs behind the scenes often unbeknownst to students. Intricacies of this trans-local involvement are problematic for staff and ultimately students. For instance, students unknowledgeable about these intricacies, generally believe they are filling out a FAFSA form to have information sent to the schools of their choice (which is true), but may be unaware of the actual sharing of their information with the other outside entities. In addition the involvement of these additional agencies brings forth the questions of how decisions are made within these other organized processes—which goes beyond the scope of this study. What is verified here, is the trans-local nature of the FAFSA and the intricate web of agencies that are involved in the determination of a student's eligibility for aid.

One would think that this system would not be much of a problem as long as students are being factual and truthful about the information contained in the FAFSA. However, much of the information that is being submitted within the FAFSA is true at a particular moment in time, but does not remain true throughout the course of the process. This presents a host of problems

for students as they are, in effect, required to input information in the FAFSA that is no longer true (such as income information from a prior year). Or they are forced to report events in the application as “facts” that may not yet have occurred, such as whether or not they will be graduating at the end of the school year.

Further, FAFSA’s problematic nature within financial aid process may also stem from its inability to capture the seemingly infinite combination of possibilities that characterize the familial and financial situations that shape the student’s reality today. In fact, the questions within the FAFSA could potentially be considered the real root of the problems this study brings forth. The problem of the questions contained within the FAFSA is a difficult one to realize because the questions are ultimately designed to weed out those who are ineligible for funding because they are too wealthy. However, it may serve to achieve the opposite by assuming that family members can be easily contacted, or that families understand and complete the tax information that is required to complete it. It also demands information that may not be readily available to students, or may cause them to report information that is a skewed picture of their actual situation. Students who aren’t privileged, may have more difficulty understanding or retrieving information about parental finances, W2 forms, or other forms that document income. The FAFSA also assumes two-parent or nuclear families and a steady source of income are the norm, and in doing so, it makes answering the questions within it so difficult for some students they may feel alienated by the process. These illustrations are a limited example of the difficulties FAFSA creates within processes as it tries to organize and govern. However, they

serve to clarify how the ambiguous nature (especially to the public) of FAFSA activity creates the discursivity that dominates within organizational practices.

### **Social Organization within Financial Aid Processes**

The first indication of social organization occurring within the data emerges from how complex the FAFSA is as a form within work processes. Counselors that were interviewed tended to speak about the complexity of the process within tasks that they needed to complete. For example, this counselor describes how the FAFSA governs the work in what she termed as CR or 'counselor review.'

***"Yes. So for my processer review I usually keep handy a blank FAFSA so that I can make sure that everything is inputted correctly when I am putting in the documents, or verification documents that we received."***

And here she further explains how she completes her duties in relation to FAFSA:

***"Basically what I do, this is just the processing of how it works best for me. I usually print out their, essentially their FAFSA and their income information and then I actually manually try to figure out how much that their....so with this student they are stating that they are unemployed due to relocation."***

And here she articulates some of the underlying structure in the FAFSA:

***Interviewer: So the screens that you are utilizing already formulas in them?***

***Participant: Yes***

***Interviewer: Based off of what?***

***Participant: Based off of the FAFSA, so basically the FAFSA has three different formulas that they use. Based off of that information, that is what is uploaded into our system.***

Another counselor describes the vast amount of knowledge required to understand the work being undertaken:

***“There can be challenging days. Certainly, that is part of it. I think because we have to know so much. I came from a different environment than I think almost anybody else in the office. It was really challenging for me to transition into this role because there was so much I needed to know that I didn’t know and here you get lost in the technicality of it, every little tiny thing, making sure you get everything right; if you don’t get it right, somebody is going to let you know, first of all, but it could potentially be really bad, too, if you don’t get the amount of money correct.”***

And finally, another instance of the cumbersome nature of the FAFSA for counselors and students:

***“If there is any corrections made on their FAFSA based off of the documentation that was submitted, then they are able to see. We send that correction to the Central Processing System, so then they are able to see on their FAFSA, what changes we have made as well. Anytime they have any questions they can always call or get in contact with us and we’ll go over those changes made by us.”***

Here it becomes apparent that the complexities of this process for counselors manifest themselves as problems for students. As counselors juggle the requirements of verifying information from multiple outside agencies, they demand increasing amounts of information

from the students, who must then comply with these continuous demands. This may not be what the counselor wishes to require of a student, but they are forced to through the incessant demands of an application process that cannot capture the broad contexts of students' actual experience.

In addition these exchanges serve as examples of how the FAFSA dominates the organizational processes within the duties counselors must assume daily. Although I've articulated it throughout this research, it is important to document how this form organizes and drives the work that counselors strive to complete, and that in its complexity, it creates discursivity that ultimately hinders students with processes that become overwhelming and burdensome as one request can easily become several. Further, in documenting the complexity of the process and how that relates to students, we can begin to understand how these processes would further impede groups of people that have historically been outsiders to knowledge of the ideologies represented within the FAFSA.

### **Institutional Texts and Discourse**

Institutional texts and discourses are the driving forces of how institutions govern. As Dorothy Smith (2006) posits in the handbook *Institutional Ethnography as Practice*, "incorporating texts into ethnographic practice is essential to institutional ethnography. It is what enables it to reach beyond the locally observable and discoverable into the trans-local social relations and organization that permeate and control the local" (pg. 114). She further explains that texts are part of 'sequenced' actions that are utilized within practice by being

‘activated’ by the person who is working with the form at a particular space and time (Smith 2006).

The data within this study illustrates how this occurs within financial aid processes as a counselor articulates within the observation of processes:

***“So, the nice thing is, with the Revision Request for a Change of Income we can actually take a look at what is going on right now versus when a student originally filed their FAFSA”***

And further evidence of how the information on the form is ‘activated’ by the worker:

***“I’ll utilize the numbers off of here and then the dates that they gave me to determine what’s the most accurate and appropriate amount to indicate on the FAFSA”***

In these next excerpts we can see the limiting nature of forms in trying to determine what information to include in determining eligibility:

***“It’s hard because we can only work with the documentation that we have. That’s kind of my process, what we have is what I’m going to utilize. If I do have questions then I will definitely reach out to the student to ask them, did they mean this, or did they meant that? Or is that something that we should include in this or not?”***

An additional example of the limitations of text in trying to clarify the information can be seen in the following exchange:

***Interviewer: So often you have to go back and clarify exactly what is being conveyed on the form because it may not be clear to you?***



***Participant: Yes. I try to do that because I want to make sure that I am getting the most accurate information. I think these forms, when the students are filling them out, they are not indicating all of the information that we need to know.***

Here we have evidence of how certain ideologies within the FAFSA manifest themselves within process:

***“An example of that is on this form here, it’s asking for untaxed income and benefits. They did indicate that they are receiving a housing allowance. But on this, you wouldn’t want to actually indicate that they were receiving housing allowance for....basic allowance for military housing, and this student has indicated that. They are military and military dependent, so in this case I would probably....that could potentially affect the student’s expected family contribution when I put in the values. I would actually, probably reach out to them and make sure this is something we need to report. Or is it not something that we don’t need to report on this form.”***

This data conveys the troublesome nature of texts as we can begin to see how ruling relations are formed within these processes, and further evidence of the ideology contained within the FAFSA as a textually-mediated form of governing within practices. More importantly, it makes clear how eligibility could potentially be affected because of incorrect information. This excerpt shows how limited knowledge or understanding of military practice, and its presence within the FAFSA could affect those with a limited understanding of military ideology. Moreover, we can start to envision the ruling relations that occur as texts transforms from actual student experience to ‘obtaining the information needed to make someone eligible or

ineligible.’ This concept is commonly described within IE as ‘subordination of human experience to organizational processes,’ and is evident in the exchanges regarding texts. Completing the text to fulfill the requirement the FAFSA demands becomes the focus of how the FAFSA operates, locally and trans-locally within the financial aid process.

To gain a deeper understanding of how a ruling relation occurs within the process outlined in the excerpt of this data, it should also be recognized that the counselor has a choice within the process to contact the student for clarification. However, in the interest of time a counselor may make certain assumptions regarding the information they have received. Especially when time becomes the motivating factor in completing their duties within established organizational norms.

In fact, time was a frequent theme within the data and dominated many of the observations and interviews that occurred. Here is an example of a counselor explaining to a caller how time might factor in to the processing of their particular information:

***“It depends on the number of appeals we have. Currently it will probably be another week or so before we would be able to get it in. You’re turning it in during the first week of the quarter and we just....it’s an extremely busy time. It may be a week or so before we are able to review that, your appeal.”***

A counselors’ concern for time is evidenced in another excerpt here:

***“Yes. Like I said, I pull them up, read through what was here, see what was going on; and I’ve got more than usual today so I don’t know if I want to sit through all of this. The only other thing I have to do is a ton of emails.”***

And here another counselor articulates her attempts to save time within processes:

***“Well because there are so many screens that we already have to look at and because we are revisiting a lot of students, you get a document from Student A, but we asked for three documents and it is coming in piecemeal or the document is incomplete, so the fewer steps we can take in a one process... that might mean that we can spend more time using steps we have in another. We’re all trying to find ways to minimize the screens and buttons we have to press individually.”***

In these statements you can see how the counselor is confronted with the tension of time completion of duties within specific timeframes. This illustration also documents the completion of time as a part of institutional process. Further, it demonstrates the tensions that are naturally manifested between counselors and management on the importance of time within processes. These tensions (whether real or constructed), have an effect on how counselors are able to effectively complete their work and make decisions on behalf of students. Through this tension of counselors’ perceiving time to complete duties as an issue, the human experience is subordinated to institutional process. This results in the objectification of the student’s experience to the organizational imperatives of completing duties within an acceptable timeframe.

### **The Ruling Relations Embedded within Processes**

The complex managing of this sensitive and, at times, puzzling information by counselors serves to create a host of tensions within the actualities of interacting with students and completing daily duties. For example, in the lobby on both campuses, student’s body language

suggested anxiety and /or irritation when they were required to respond to requests from the financial aid office. In addition, counselors were often tasked with helping the students feel more comfortable, particularly when dealing with students who seemed annoyed by certain requests.

***Entries from my observational journal for 3/30 @ 9:04 am state: "One student in the lobby one being seen by a counselor. Students walking in seem anxious or annoyed- this is something they don't want to deal with. The next student speaks softly-what do they want she seems to be wondering. Interactions, happen quickly. Counselor then explains letter is needed from the student's advisor to override the system-student leaves unfazed another thing he has to do." And then at 9:07 am, "typing as counselors are working-possibly answering emails-work must get done."***

These types of observations illustrate the multi-tasking and skill level involved in meeting with and communicating a multitude of complex information to students. The skilled nature of the work, along with the dissemination of complex information and the sensitive nature of the encounters with students, demonstrate a host of potential tensions for staff in utilizing FAFSA as a tool for organizing student information and navigating university processes.

Equally problematic, staff is tasked with determining if the information contained within the FAFSA form for students is indeed factual, or is no longer applicable. This creates a host of tensions for staff, and complicates the process of determining if a student is, in fact, eligible for funding or how much funding a student should receive. How this information is understood by counselors also locates another important area of tension within the processing of student

information in relation to the FAFSA: the counselors' relationship to the public as an arbiter of public funds, versus their required advocacy for student within their duties as counselors. This surfaced numerous times in the data as counselors tried to articulate the difficulty of navigating these two important distinctions. This particular excerpt is from a counselor articulating the difficulties of determining if a student is compliant in satisfactory academic progress:

***"We kind of discuss how it's going to impact the student if we don't approve it. A good example, I had a pretty yucky appeal with this gentleman and I took it to the appeals committee, and you can see that what was requested from him was pretty extensive. He came into the desk the other day and he got me, which was fortunate, and we were able to kind of talk a little bit more about his circumstances, and things that happened. The concern with this gentleman was that a lot of his appeals and I think he had five or something like that, I mean he had a lot of appeals, a lot of them were for similar reasons."***

Further data confirms the necessity of the counselor to be able to justify her decision making within processes:

***"We're looking at how it's going to impact them if they don't receive financial aid. There is a fine line because you want to approve it, and you want them to be successful, but to have so many appeals, failed so many times, are you just enabling them to continue to fail if they just do too many things like this."***

Here is some articulation of the skeptical nature that arises among counselors within decision making:

***“Right; but then the people who are just using it to live, and not to actually complete the program; the ones who are just this is almost like their job, they’re just students for a living, and using financial aid to just get by. Yes, you are definitely going to always have those situations, but that again is maybe why it’s so important to do a case-by-case.”***

These exchanges not only illustrate the difficulty the counselor faces in justifying her approval of a situation that could be construed as a waste of taxpayer resources, but also emphasizes the limiting nature of texts through an appeal process in that she was able to get additional insight into the situation by a chance face-to-face encounter with the student. This tension within the process is a daily tightrope that counselors must traverse. Interestingly enough, the culture that management encourages is toward advocacy in the student’s favor, which brings up the possibility that the further removed from the actual duties of processing one is, the better able they may be to err on the side of the student. However, as I was limited in my interview of financial aid management, this is not analysis that is verifiable by data.

Nevertheless, the above exchange demonstrates how the counselor must navigate a broad set of situations to determine eligibility. This includes situations such as face-to-face contact that can be charged with student anxiety, and potential aggressive behavior by the student. In addition, the counselor must have the ability to explain and clarify their decisions to the public, as well as justify them to peers, management and taxpayers within limited amounts of time.

The tension of this constant conflict in so many different directions manifests itself as a documentable culture among counselors. The root of this tension is between protecting public investment and advocacy for students. This inevitably creates a ruling situation in the form of a

knotty challenge for counselors to get all decisions correct for both students and the public. Inevitably, situations of exclusion and marginalization arise, as counselors must make decisions that favor one group over another. In the amalgamation of data the ruling relations are now beginning to emerge through the limiting nature of text and language, and the subordination of student experience to the organizational necessities of getting work completed. This objectification of students to process, and the tensions inherent within these duties gives us real and tangible evidence that can be utilized to better inform the practices that ultimately serve to keep students marginalized.

### **Conclusion-How is this a Sociology for the People (Students)?**

As a university, we are accountable to continually reflect on how and why we do things. This accountability commences with seeking ways to improve practice and provide knowledge about those improvements to our community. Through critical reflection we can provide opportunities for pathways of collaboration and innovation on how to make the intricacies of administrative and financial aid processes more understandable to those who are involved. This is the importance of utilizing institutional ethnography. One of the reasons for choosing institutional ethnography as a method for conducting this research is the prospect of developing a mapping of the problematic and displaying that information on a website for the public to utilize. Through the process of looking at the actualities of organizational practice through the embodied experiences of the persons who are performing it, we can uncover how institutional discourse and text within organizational practice can serve to create ruling

relations that affect people, and more importantly, utilize the information to help make financial aid processes known through mapping them.

In their book *Reinventing Financial Aid*, authors Sara Golderick-Rab and Andrew Kelly arrive at the enlightening conclusion that a transformation of our current system of financial aid is grounded in documenting the empirical evidence of those affected (2015). Institutional ethnography provides a useful way for ordinary citizens and insiders of ‘specific knowledge’ of problematic processes to conduct meaningful research. People who, within their everyday duties, have the feeling that things could be done differently—better if we took the time to understand how ruling occurs through organizational processes. Conducting a research examination utilizing IE methodology allows the researcher to “look up” from where they are, and from where the students and staff are whose experiences have helped define FAFSA as a problematic. IE also gives voice to their experiences and struggles while helping them understand and resist forms of structural power.

As outsiders to the processes of the FAFSA as it relates to determining who is eligible, IE helps students overcome the complexity of the information and become insiders through mapping some of the processes. This is why it was important for me to find a way to get this information to the community. For maximum accessibility, I opted to utilize a website to provide 3 distinct maps of FAFSA processes. The first is the dependent student process<sup>9</sup>, the second is an overview of the overall processes of FAFSA within the university.

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<sup>9</sup> This is the process by which dependent students are required to submit parental information within the FAFSA unless they are excluded from the process by some ideological notions. Service to the military is one, being a parent themselves is another, age and absence of parental support through death or other circumstances are other reasons why a student may be able to bypass parental information on the FAFSA.



By making the invisible, visible through institutional ethnography, we can begin to understand governing through policy and process in a way that is useful to the very students we are helping to achieve their educational goals. The FAFSA is a prime example of how one text or document broadly used to try to capture individual experience is bound to perpetuate oppression and exclusion within the bureaucratic processes it seeks to govern. However, as Janet Rankin and Marie Campbell (2009) importantly point out, “While the research does not unsettle the ruling relations themselves, the study problematizes the forms of knowledge that rule the setting, thus, enabling for a deeper understanding and ultimately a more effective approach to those forms of knowledge” (p. 17).

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